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ABSTRACT

A study focused on the effects of forensic participation on two specific traits--argumentativeness and verbal aggression. Two hundred eighty-one high school forensic students participating at a large western forensic tournament in the beginning of the 1990 academic year completed D. A. Infante's Argumentative and Verbal Aggression Scales. Results indicated a positive correlation between argumentativeness and high school debating experience, and showed that verbal aggression decreases as argumentativeness increases. Results supported the idea that social learning and argumentative skill deficiency are two of the major causes of verbal aggression, and that developing argument skills through debate training strengthens the argumentativeness trait and thereby reduces the verbal aggression trait. Finally, results showed that forensic directors who choose to cut debate in favor of individual events cannot justify it when argumentativeness and verbal aggression are the criteria. Data examined suggest that debate activity as an academic discipline should be viewed optimistically. (Two tables of data are included; 24 references are attached.) (PRA)

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THE EFFECTS OF FORENSICS TRAINING ON VERBAL AGGRESSION AND ARGUMENTATIVENESS

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Competitive academic forensics offer a unique educational experience. Studies suggest the debate activity associates with those perceived as superior communicators and provides excellent preprofessional experience (Colbert & Biggers, 1986). Moreover, 50 years of research associates debate training with enhancement of critical thinking skills (Howell, 1942; Brembeck, 1949; Williams, 1951; Beckman, 1957; Jackson, 1961; Cross, 1971, and Colbert, 1987). To be sure, an impressive amount of empirical research suggests debate training can be a valuable part of one's education.

One neglected area of pedagogy research involves the effects that forensic tournament training could have on student traits. Some early research imply positive effects regarding the traits of those who participate in debate. (Tucker, Keohler, & Mlady, 1967; and King & Phifer, 1968) Recently, Simons (1990) observes that, "[r]esearch into the area of debater's personality has ceased during the past decade. Yet circumstances have arisen which [sic] seem to justify a further look into the area" (p. 4). Such circumstances include the growing popularity of Individual Events (IE); a shift from problem-solution (policy) paradigms to nonpolicy approaches (value paradigms); faster than normal rates of delivery by debaters; and criticism of overemphasizing competition.

At least three reasons justify an examination into the current methods of teaching forensics. First, in times of budget cuts and competing resources it is especially important that

forensic educators have information to decide what types of forensic activities deserve the highest priority. Many programs cannot support individual events, policy, and nonpolicy formats of debating. Second, a major shift from traditional policy style debating to non-policy (value) debating has occurred since the 1970's. Most universities no longer offer policy debating (NDT) and participate in non-policy debate (CEDA). At the high school level, dramatic increases in Lincoln-Douglas debate (nonpolicy) have also occurred, while NFL (policy) participation declines. The effects of the shift from a paradigm largely adapted from Dewey's Problem-Solving principles to models more abstract often focusing on conflicting values have not been empirically investigated. Third, many observers do not feel the rapid rate of presentation, competitiveness, and game emphasis of tournament debating make it a different activity than it was 20 or 30 years ago. It is important for forensic educators to have empirical evidence to judge whether their teaching strategies are effective and to warn them of potential adverse effects.

Some anecdotal testimony claim that debate tournaments often tolerate and even reward hostile or verbally aggressive behavior. Steinfatt (1990) reports, "a good deal of hostility was sometimes generalized, sometimes aimed specifically at an opponent, and sometimes aimed at the judge" in debates that he recently observed. (p. 67) Steinfatt is not alone asserting some debaters exhibit behavior that is interpreted as aggressive. Other ob-

servers agree. McGough's (1988) visit to a high school debate workshop tournament leads him to say debating is analogous to "Dungeons and Dragons, the thrill of combat, and an imaginary universe" making it like "war games." Frank (1991) writes, "the delivery patterns of our student debaters are often inhumane and incomprehensible and . . . these patterns constitute a crisis for the debate community . . .. The virtual disappearance of civility in modern debate can be traced to the belief that debate not only shares some characteristics of a game, but that debate is a game" (p. 6). Horn and Underberg (1991) conclude, "Pressure to win [debates are] not unique to students--coaches often experience a similar need to win. Regardless of who [sic] is at fault for these misplaced priorities, the results are detrimental to educational forensics" (p. 9). Despite these isolated observations, little empirical research measuring the effects of various types of contemporary forensic participation is reported.

Given the abundance of empirical research associating debate training with critical thinking development one suspects it could also develop argumentation skills. The abilities to define a problem; select pertinent information for the solution of a problem; recognize stated and unstated assumptions; formulate and select relevant and promising hypotheses; and draw valid conclusions and judge the validity of inferences (Watson & Glaser, 1980) are important critical thinking skills developed by debating. A model of aggressive personality (Infante, 1987) suggests argumentativeness (ARG) is a subset of assertiveness. Verbal

aggression (VA) is not related to (ARG) or assertiveness because (VA) is a subset of hostility, and hostility and assertiveness are in different and unrelated dimensions of personality. Simons (1990) reports preliminary data suggesting college "debaters are more assertive than their non-debating counterparts" (p. 8). Taken together, it is possible the negative behaviors reported are not typical or that assertiveness is sometimes perceived as (VA) by certain critics. The disdain of debater vocal intensity by those who are disenchanted is consistent with the latter explanation. In either event, more precise research rather than limited, sporadic, unsystematic, and subjective observations is needed.

This study focuses on the effects of forensic participation on two specific traits--argumentativeness and verbal aggression. Infante and Rancer (1982) write, "[t]he locus of attack may be used for distinguishing argument from verbal aggression." They explain,"[a]rgument involves presenting and defending positions on controversial issues while attacking the position taken by others on the issues. Verbal aggression . . . denotes attacking the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person's position on a topic of communication" (p. 62). A typology of (VA) includes: character attacks, competence attacks, insults, maledictions, teasing, ridicule, profanity, threats, background attacks, physical appearance attacks, and nonverbal indicators (paralinguistics). (Infante, 1987; and Infante & Wig-

ley, 1986) Research suggest (VA) precedes a range of effects including damage to self-concepts (Infante, 1988) physical violence in families (Gelles, 1974) and criminal violence. (Toch, 1969)

Four causes for the use of (VA) are hypothesized: 1) psychopathology; 2) disdain for others; 3) social learning; and 4) argumentative skill deficiency. (Infante, 1987) Given the view forensic tournaments are cocurricular educational experience, it is reasonable to expect such training, especially debate, reduces argument skill deficiency. Rancer, Baukus, & Infante (1985) reason, "If the parties in an argument are skillful arguers, (VA) is less likely. Skillful arguers will rarely run out of things to say when defending and attacking positions. In fact, they typically think of so many things to say that they do not have enough time to reach their final thought on the controversial issue. Verbal aggression is also less likely because skillful arguers have a clear conception of the difference between genuine argument and verbal aggression" (p. 27). These researchers (Infante and others) suggest social learning and argumentative skill deficiency are two major causes of (VA).

It is therefore reasonable to expect forensic participation enhances individual (ARG). Infante (1982) reports, "the results of [a] discriminant analysis, suggest the most argumentative individuals had the most high school training in argumentation . . .. Because of the ex pos facto nature of the research, the relationship observed might also be explained by

the students who are initially high in argumentativeness electing the most high school training in argumentation" (p. 146). He concludes, "Research at the high school level is needed to determine what the speech communication curriculum and extracurricular activities do to the student's level of argumentativeness" (p. 146). The present study attempts to confirm and extend Infante's findings.

It is important to establish the effects of forensic training on participants, especially if these activities possibly diminish positive traits or reinforce negative traits. If different methods of forensic training increases (VA) or reduces (ARG), than serious rethinking of these approaches may be justified on those grounds. Two hypotheses were tested to determine the effects of forensic competition on (ARG) and (VA).

H_1:

Students with participation experience in competitive debate differ in their level of argumentativeness and/or verbal aggression from students without experience.

H_2:

Students with participation experience in IE (specifically extemporaneous speaking, dramatic interpretation, expository speaking, humorous interpretation, oratory, and impromptu) differ in argumentativeness and/or verbal aggression from students without experience.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 335 high school forensic students participating at a large Western forensic tournament in the beginning of the 1990 academic year. Thirty-seven subjects were excluded who failed to complete the argumentative and/or verbal aggression questionnaire. Individual event participants who did not complete the instrument typically wrote, "not a debater" and returned the questionnaire. They seemed to perceive the instruments were measuring constructs relevant to argumentation only and assumed the study was not relevant to them. Seventeen additional subjects were excluded because of systematic methods of marking of question items. (e.g. 1,2,1,2,1,2 or 1,2,3,4,1,2,3,4, etc . . .)

The data revealed there were 159 males, 115 females, and the remainder was of unknown gender. The age group ranged from 13 to 18 (18 = 6%; 17 = 31%; 16 = 27%; 15 = 21%; 14 = 7%; and 13 = 1%). The birthplaces of the subjects represented over 25 states and 6 countries. Both private and public schools were included in the study. Overall, the experienced and pre-experienced groups appeared to represent a wide cross-section of ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity.

The subjects indicated their experience by years and types (IE, policy, and value) of events on the questionnaire. Students in their first year of competition were assigned to the pre-

experienced comparison group. Students with one to four years of experience were assigned to the experienced group. All subjects could be considered self-selected because they were competing in the forensic tournament. By studying both groups at the beginning of the debate season, the pre-experienced group could be compared to those with one to four years of prior experience. This design better captured the attraction effect than previous research, however it is still an ex pos facto design. There was no true control group in the study, therefore, caution is appropriate when generalizing the findings.

Procedures

Each student completed Infante's Argumentative and Verbal Aggression Scales. Both instruments have replicated studies to show reliability, stability, and construct validity. (Infante & Rancer, 1982 and Infante & Wigley, 1986) The data was collected at the beginning of the academic year so the comparison group (pre-experienced debaters or pre-experienced in I.E.) could be contrasted with those having prior experience. This technique helped to control for the self-selection effect of students attracted to forensic activities. The issue of self-selection is important because most previous research concerning the effects of forensic experience used non-forensic students as controls. This makes it difficult to determine if the type of student attracted to the activity is unique to the effect the researcher attempts to measure.

The (ARG) and (VA) scales were given to judges before the fifth and sixth rounds of the tournament. The judges were asked to distribute, answer questions, collect, and return the scales at the completion of the round with their ballots. There was no reason to feel the conditions or nature of administering the instrument were threatening. The process of filling out questionnaires at forensic tournaments is common and there was no reason to believe any of the participants felt threatened. Thus, experimenter bias should be considered minimal.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 results divides into two parts. First, do those with participation experience in competitive debate differ in their level of (VA) from those who have not yet participated. Table 1 shows that pre-experienced debaters had a mean of 51.83 on Infante's (VA) scale. The experienced debaters had a mean of 48.55. This data produced a t-score of 2.31 that was significant at ** $p > .05$. This finding suggests the difference between the two was probably not due to chance.

The second part of the first hypothesis that students with participation experience in competitive academic debate will not differ in their level of (ARG) from those who have not yet participated was also supported. The pre-experience debate group had a mean of 75.07 on Infante's (ARG) Scale. The experienced debate group had a mean of 78.72 (Table-2) The t-score of -2.51 was significant at ** $p < .05$. This finding provides support that students with participation experience in competi-

tive academic debate differ in (ARG) scores from those who have not yet participated. It is noteworthy that experienced debaters had a higher (ARG) mean and a lower (VA) mean.

Two related findings should be stated. First, experienced value debaters differ significantly from their pre-experienced counterparts on the (VA) scale. Pre-experienced value debaters had a mean of 51.13 and experienced value debaters had mean of 46.10. (Table-1) The probability of this difference not being due to chance alone was significant at ** $p < .05$.

Second, pre-experienced policy debaters differ significantly from their experienced counterparts. Pre-experienced policy debaters had a mean of 75.84, while experienced policy debaters had a mean of 79.75 on the (ARG) scale. The probability of the difference not due to chance alone was significant at ** $p < .05$.

The null of the second hypothesis that students with participation experience in IE differ in (VA) and (ARG) from students without IE experience is not rejected. The data suggest that pre-experienced IE contestants have a mean of 51.20, while those with IE experience have a mean of 49.11, on Infante's (VA) scale. Those in the pre-experienced IE group have a mean of 76.66 and those with IE experience had a mean of 78.12 and on Infante's (ARG) Scale. In both instances, statistical significance is not found.

Differences between male and female forensic competitors, however, appear to be significant. Male participants averaged

51.95 on the (VA) scale and 78.44 on the (ARG) scale. Female participants averaged 47.65 on the (VA) scale and 75.02 on the (ARG) scale. The probability of the difference being due to chance alone was ** $p > .05$ in both instances. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting males may be more (ARG) and (VA) than females.

DISCUSSION

The present study suggests some noteworthy conclusions. First, the data provides support for Infante's (1982) work reporting a positive correlation between (ARG) and high school debating experience. Moreover the present study eliminates the self-selection bias that may have affected that study. Because pre-experienced subjects and experienced subjects had both chosen to compete in forensics, the difference was probability not a function of the subjects attraction to the activity.

Second, (VA) decreases as (ARG) increases, supporting Rancer, Baukus, & Infante's (1985) finding, "If parties in an argument are skillful arguers, verbal aggression is less likely." These findings also support the idea that social learning and argumentative skill deficiency are two of the major causes of (VA). One explanation is that developing argument skills through debate training strengthens the (ARG) trait and thereby reducing the (VA) trait. Once an individual can argue effectively, the need to rely on (VA) seems to diminish.

Third, these findings are consequential because they suggest certain communication activities may enhance a constructive

personality trait and reduce one that is very destructive. This does not mean that (VA) and poor argumentation are nonexistent in tournament debate. However, it appears the activity has the potential to develop argument skills through teaching critical thinking that reduces the student's need to rely on (VA) to defend their views.

In addition, this data suggests experienced policy and value debaters differ regarding (ARG) and (VA). It appears policy experience results in higher (ARG) scores, while value experience results in lower (VA) scores. These findings seem to support the notion that policy debate emphasizes argument skills, while value debating focuses on stylistic goals. These findings have implications for educators who set the educational agenda of each activity. Those subscribing to a rhetorical stylistic approach (value debate) may be affecting their students (VA) level differently. Educators concerned with developing critical thinking skills (policy debate) may be affecting their students (ARG) level differently. Obviously, not all forensics directors fall neatly into either camp. However, all should consider these effects before deciding what specific activities is best for their students.

Perhaps most importantly, it appears that debating does not contribute to (VA). Those attracted to the debating activity without experience have higher (VA) scores. These same people enter high on the (VA) scale to begin with. This data suggests

training in academic competitive debate may reduce the levels of (VA) of those attracted to it. The same seems to be true regarding (ARG). Those attracted to debating without experience did not score as high as experienced debaters on the (ARG) scale. While replication and more study is needed, this data supports the conclusion that debating potentially discourages (VA), by reinforcing (ARG).

Finally, the finding that IE does not appear to affect (ARG) or (VA) has pragmatic implications. Forensic directors who choose to cut debate in favor of (IE) cannot justify it when (ARG) and (VA) are the criteria. If forensic educators have the goal of increasing (ARG) or reducing (VA) skills, the present study suggests debate training may be a more effective strategy than (IE). When programs face competition for resources, curtailing debate to preserve IE may not be an educationally sound decision. This is not to say that IE is not beneficial, but in times of limited resources choosing the most beneficial activities become vital.

As with all research, several limitations should be mentioned. Even though data collection was at the beginning of the forensics season, some of the pre-experienced group could have had limited exposure to debate training before the survey. One should infer, however, the limited involvement of the pre-experienced group would produce scant effects. It is likely their limited background would serve to lessen the effect size between the two groups if anything.

Although the differences between experienced and pre-experienced debate groups were significant, caution should be exercised before attempting to generalize. The difference was in the predicted direction, suggesting that debaters had higher (ARG) and lower (VA) scores, but the effect size between the two was not great, possibly because of the high ceilings of those attracted to argumentation activities. In any event, replication of these findings are warranted.

Future research should consider the long term effects of debate participation on (ARG) and (VA). Some students compete as many as seven years in high school and college forensics. Research measuring the effects of (VA) and (ARG) on CEDA and NDT participation would also be useful. These activities, like policy and LD, have different educational philosophies. It would also be interesting to empirically ascertain if (VA) and (ARG) relates to an individual's ability to think critically. Critical thinking skill enhancement strongly associates with training in debate. It is likely that gains in critical thinking skills explain why debate training enhances (ARG) and reduces (VA).

In conclusion, the present data provides an optimistic perspective of the debate activity as an academic discipline. The data suggests debating increases (ARG). It also appears debating has the potential to reduce (VA). Future research should attempt to confirm and replicate these findings.

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TABLE-1

Mean Numbers of Verbal Aggression

Debate	N	M	SD	SE
Pre-experienced	130	51.83	12.38	1.085
Experienced	141	48.55	11.02	.928
Value Debate				
Pre-experienced	217	51.13	11.44	.776
Experienced	54	46.10	12.38	1.685
Individual Events				
Pre-experienced	126	51.20	11.72	1.04
Experienced	140	49.11	11.91	1.01
Gender				
Male	158	51.95	11.28	.897
Female	112	47.65	12.07	1.140

Table-2

Mean Numbers of Argumentativeness

Debate	N	M	SD	SE
Pre-experienced	129	75.07	12.75	1.123
Experienced	136	78.72	10.88	.933
Policy Debate				
Pre-experienced	190	75.84	12.31	.893
Experienced	75	79.75	10.53	1.216
Individual Events				
Pre-experienced	213	76.66	12.20	.836
Experienced	52	78.12	10.88	1.509
Gender				
Male	151	78.44	11.74	.956
Female	113	75.02	12.01	1.130